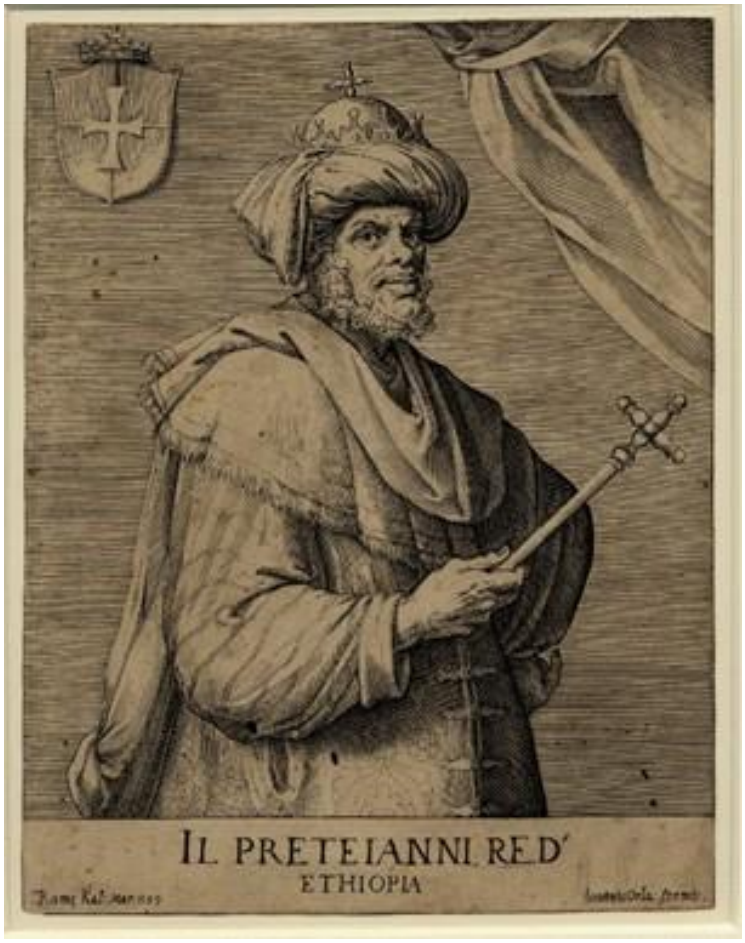
The Dethroning:
Prester John's Demise and The Shaping of Modern Ethiopia

By Jeremy Howell



History Honors Thesis 2018

To my parents,
for everything.

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Introduction

A Story About a Story: An Introduction to the Topic

Somewhere between the medieval and the modern, between the political and the religious, between Europe and Africa, rests the legend of Prester John. Born in one era of European conquest and destroyed in another, the Prester John legend tells of a mysterious Christian kingdom somewhere beyond Europe. The legend says the kingdom was ruled by a descendent of the Magi, a man called Prester John. It was said Prester John possessed unimaginable wealth, a fierce army, and long lost Christian treasures such as the holy grail. For over half a millennium, this legend colored the way Europeans looked at Africa. Then, almost as quietly as the legend came, it faded away. The legend's influence ceased, and it became a historical footnote. Starting in the twentieth century, however, scholars began to explore the legend's origins and influence at its height. This has continued into the twenty-first century. Scholars on this topic include Keagan Brewer, Matteo Salvadore, and Manuel João Ramos. But no scholar has made a concerted effort to discover how and why the legend faded away when it did. This will be the first substantive and thorough study exclusively dedicated to answering those two questions.

In accomplishing its goal, this work will not only fill in an important historical gap in several fields of scholarship, but also it will provide a fresh perspective on the development and deterioration of relations between Europeans and Africans (specifically Ethiopians) in the early-modern and modern eras. This work will argue that increasing political and religious tension between Europeans and Ethiopians led Europeans to gradually dispense with the Prester John legend. By the nineteenth century, Europeans dismissed Ethiopians as uncivilized heretics that would be better off conquered.

Prester John Prior to the Sixteenth Century: An Introduction to the Legend

The Prester John legend's origins are deeply tied to the Crusades. In 1122, Pope Calixtus II had received a mysterious traveler at his court. The traveler called himself John and claimed to be the "Patriarch of the Indians."[1] This man apparently regaled the Pope with various fantastic tales of his homeland.[2] A few decades later, a German chronicler and clergyman named Offton von Freising recorded in his *Chronica de Duabus Civitatibus* that in 1145 he met Hugh, Bishop of Jabala at the court of Pope Eugene III. According to von Freising, Bishop Hugh spoke to Pope Eugene III about a Nestorian Christian priest and king somewhere beyond Europe. Bishop Hugh declared this king to be a descendant of the Magi and said that this Nestorian king wished for Eugene III to wage another crusade against the Muslims.[3] These two recorded events seem to have provided the framework for what would become the legend of Prester John.

Not long after von Freising recorded this story, in 1165, a letter began to make its way across Europe. This letter, claiming to have originated at the court of someone calling himself Prester John, was addressed to the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Komnenos.[4] The letter stated:

> I, Prester John, am lords of lords and exceed all kings of the entire earth in virtue, power, and all the riches which are under heaven. Seventy-two kings are tributaries to us. I am a devoted Christian, and everywhere we protect the poor Christians that our clemency's authority rules over, and we sustain them with our alms. We have it on oath to visit the lord's sepulcher

[1] Keegan Brewer, *Prester John: The Legend and its Sources* (Virginia: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), 29.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Umberto Eco, "The Book of Legendary Lands," Translated by Alastair McEwen (New York: Rizzoli ex libris, 2013), 101.
[4] Eco, "The Book of Legendary Lands,"101.

> with the greatest army, as is fitting, to humble the glory of our majesty, and to vanquish the enemies of the cross of Christ and exalt His blessed name.[5]

The letter goes on to describe various natural and religious wonders in Prester John Kingdom.[6] The letter had seemingly come from the same person Bishop Hugh of Jabala spoke of. In reality however, the Medievalist Keagan Brewer argues that, "It was penned by a European, probably a German national c. 1165-1170."[7] Brewer also notes that while the letter may seem "humorous centuries later" it is unlikely "medieval audiences saw it in this light."[8] That medieval Europeans took the letter seriously seems almost certain when one considers the actions taken by European leaders after receiving the letter. In addition to the Byzantine court, the letter found its way into the hands of Pope Alexander III and the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick Barbarossa. In 1177, Pope Alexander III dispatched a mission to find the mysterious Prester John and convert him to Catholicism.[9] This would be the first of countless missions across the centuries to locate the fabled Prester John and his Christian kingdom.

Over the coming centuries the legend of Prester John grew, and the specifics about where and what his kingdom was like changed with each generation. What did not change, however, was that European leaders continued to believe that Prester John was a real king and that his kingdom existed. In 1221, the French theologian Jacques de Vitry wrote to Pope Honoris III and stated that an allegiance with Prester John could turn the tide of the crusades and give supreme victory to the Christians over the Muslims.[10] King Louis IX of France (1214-1270), viewed

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[5] "The Prester John Letter" circa 1165 in *Prester John: The Legend and its Sources* compiled and translated by Keegan Brewer (Virginia: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), 67-68.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Brewer, *Prester John: The Legend and its Sources*, 67.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Eco, "The Book of Legendary Lands,"101.
[10] Ibid, 102.

Prester John as a potential adversary and hoped that he could ally himself with the Tartars should he ever have to face Prester John.[11]

By the fifteenth century, Ethiopia became the focus of the search for Prester John. The reason for this was twofold. Firstly, Ethiopia was a Christian kingdom far away from Europe. This seemed to be a reasonable place for Europeans to search for Prester John. Ethiopia had been a Christian nation for centuries. Ethiopian tradition states that the country even held contacts with King Solomon. Secondly, since the year 1400, the Ethiopian imperial court had been sending emissaries to Europe. The first Ethiopians to reach Europe arrived in Venice in 1402. They were immediately hailed by the Venetians as having come from the land of Prester John.[12] The reasoning behind this association is unclear, but seeing Christians so different from themselves and from so far away could have made the Venetians think that the only place these strangers could have come from was Prester John's kingdom. Regardless of the reasoning, from that point, Ethiopia was seen by many Europeans as being the true kingdom of Prester John. Prester John and his kingdom were even represented on maps during the Middle Ages through the Renaissance including the *Fra Mauro Map* from 1495 and the maps from the 1493 *Nuremberg Chronicle*.[13][14]

When Prince Henry the Navigator began sending exploratory ships along the African coast in the late fifteenth century, one of his primary goals was to locate Prester John and the Prester's kingdom. In Prester John, Prince Henry saw a potential Christian ally against the ever-expanding Islamic world. An alliance with a powerful East African king would mean that a new

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[11] Ibid.
[12] Matteo Salvadore, The African Prester John and the Birth of Ethiopian-European Relations, 1402-1555.
[13] Michael E Brooks, "Visual Representations of Prester John and his Kingdom" (Bowling Green State University, 2014).
[14] Eco, "The Book of Legendary Lands,"102."

front would be opened in the fight against the Turkish Empire.[15] Prince Henry would not live to see Portuguese contact with "Prester John." Establishing a diplomatic relationship with Prester John, however, remained a major concern to the Portuguese nobility over the next decades. Both King João and King João II of Portugal sent emissaries to locate the fabled Ethiopian ruler. King João II's emissaries located a king they believed to be the true Prester John.[16] This occurred sometime in the 1490s when Pero de Covilhã reached the Ethiopian emperor's court. It would be thirteen more years, however, before anyone in Portugal knew he had succeeded.[17] Covilhã's achievement in reaching Ethiopia began a friendly political and religious relationship between Portugal and the Ethiopian Court of "Prester John."

In response to Covilhã's arrival in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Emperor sent his own ambassador to Portugal, an Armenian named Matthew.[18] This newfound diplomatic relationship deepened further when Portugal sent another diplomatic mission to Ethiopia some decades later. A Franciscan priest on that mission, Father Francisco Alvarez (1490-1540), would write a book that would be instrumental in creating the positive European feelings toward "Prester John" at the start of the seventeenth century. By the mid-sixteenth century, Prester John's kingdom was squarely placed by Europeans in East Africa (specifically Ethiopia). Sixteenth century maps reflect this belief in East Africa holding Prester John's kingdom. An example of such a map is Abraham Ortelius' *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, which clearly lables the "empire of Prester John."[19]

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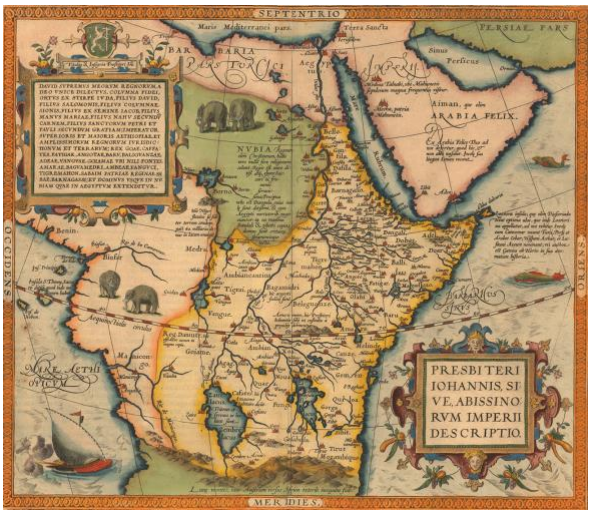
[15]Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Discoverers: A History of Man's Search to Know His World and Himself,* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 170-173.
[16] Martin Meredith, "The Fortunes of Africa: A 5,000 Year History of Wealth, Greed, and Endeavor*"* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014), 111.
[17] Meredith, "The Fortunes of Africa", 111-112.
[18] Stuart Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia, the Unknown Land: A Cultural and Historical Guide* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers), 26.
[19] Eco, *Lands*, 133



The Prester John Legend's Coming Demise

Decades of hard diplomatic work would lead to positive relations between the European emissaries and missionaries and the Ethiopian court at the start of the seventeenth century.[20] Although the relationship between Ethiopians and Europeans would begin on a stable footing, it would not stay that way. In the coming centuries, disagreeable and hostile interactions between Europeans and Ethiopians over religious and political matters – coupled with ideological shifts among Europeans toward rationalism and imperialism – led to the rejection, disregard, and eventual demise of the centuries old Prester John legend. The beginning of this process will be shown to have started in seventeenth century. The seventeenth century began with European Catholic skepticism toward the notion of an Ethiopian Prester John—but still with a feeling of reverence for Ethiopia's emperor and positive attitudes toward the Christian people of Ethiopia. The century ended, however, with European Catholic pessimism about Ethiopia's emperor and its people.

[20] Pedo Páez, "History of Ethiopia, 1622", 2 vols, Translated by Christopher J. Tribe. Edited by Isabel Boavida, Hervé Pennec and Manuel Joao Ramos (London: The Hakluyt Society, 2011), 69.

Chapter One:
Declining Catholic Opinion of Prester John in the Seventeenth Century

Introduction to Chapter One

During the seventeenth century, the long-held belief by European Catholics that the Ethiopian emperor was the literal Prester John began to diminish. As the century began, European Catholics still revered the Ethiopian emperor and referred to him as Prester John. Catholics continued to call him "Prester John" in part to keep with precedent and because the name Prester John had begun to function as an honorific title for all Ethiopian emperors. By the end of the seventeenth century, however, Catholic attitudes about Ethiopia and its emperor became pessimistic and even hostile. In many ways, the story of how European attitudes toward the honorific "Prester John" changed in the seventeenth century is the story about the intersection of self-interest and tradition. This dramatic shift in attitude coincided with, and was likely caused by, significant negative developments in relations between European Catholics in Ethiopia and the Ethiopians themselves. Chief among these was the expulsion of Jesuits in Ethiopia. During the seventeenth century, self-interest would triumph over tradition and myth. Shifting attitudes toward Prester John in this period were linked to declining Catholic relationships with and attitudes towards Ethiopians, which analysis of sixteenth and seventeenth-century primary sources will demonstrate.

Father Alvarez & The Basis for Early Seventeenth-Century Perceptions of Prester John

No individual had a greater impact on shaping seventeenth-century perceptions of Prester John than Father Francisco Alvarez, a sixteenth-century priest, traveler, and writer. His account

of traveling to Ethiopia, published as *The Prester John of the Indies*[21], is critically important to understanding European seventeenth-century perceptions of Prester John. Written in 1520 but not published until 1540, Alvarez's work represents the first published account of Ethiopia and its emperor by someone who had traveled to the region.[22] In Alvarez's day, the Catholic Portuguese were interested in Ethiopia for two main reasons. First, they wanted to establish a relationship with and a physical presence in an East African kingdom. This relationship would promote trade with the African interior, and the location would serve as service stop or weigh station for Portuguese ships journeying to the Far East. The perceived Christian bonds between Portugal and Ethiopia made the two, at first, seem to be natural allies. The second reason Portugal was interested in Ethiopia was that Portugal and its Catholic clergy saw an opportunity for Ethiopia's conversion to Catholicism. Expansion of the Church, especially during a time when its influence was shrinking due to the Protestant Reformation, was a paramount concern for the Church and Catholic empires like Portugal.

In 1520, Father Francisco Alvarez was part of a fourteen-man Portuguese diplomatic mission led by Rui de Lima. The primary goals of this mission were to locate the kingdom of Prester John; discover the status of the earlier Portuguese explorer, Pero de Covilhã; and to return the Ethiopian ambassador named Matthew, who had been sent to Portugal by the Ethiopian Emperor Lebna Dengel to establish a military alliance against the Turkish Empire.[23] Though the ambassador Matthew died during the journey to Ethiopia, Alvarez' group were

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[21] Note: The title "Prester John of the Indies" was often used in reference to Prester John. At that time, Abyssinia was often identified as belonging to the "Three Indias." During the Middles Ages, India had been an illdefined term and often served as a catchall term for exotic places. See Chapter Four in Umberto Eco's *The Book of Legendary Lands*.

[22] Raymond John Howgego, "Encyclopedia of Exploration: To 1800" (Australia: Horden House, 2003), 42.

[23] Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia*, 26.

successful in their other endeavors.[24] The group located what they believed to be the lands of Prester John (Ethiopia) and established relations with a man they thought to be Prester John (the Ethiopian emperor). They also discovered that Pero de Covilhã, sent by Portugal to find Prester John several decades before, had survived and was living in Ethiopia.[25]

After six years in Ethiopia, Alvarez returned to Europe, where news of Ethiopia and its emperor was in demand by Catholic political and religious leaders. In 1533, Alvarez reported on his travels to Pope Clement VII. He also set about publishing a chronicle of his travels. Though he intended to publish a more expansive work, his *The Prester John of the Indies* represents one of the most historically significant early works on Ethiopia from the European perspective.[26] Unlike other travel writing at the time, Alvarez's work is considered reliable as it is without fantastical or embellished elements.[27] *The Prester John of the Indies* reveals clues into not only how the Portuguese diplomats viewed the Ethiopians at "Prester John's" court, but also how the Ethiopian court viewed the Portuguese and what both groups sought from one another. In many ways, both groups viewed each other as cultural and religious curiosities. Alvarez's writing also showed a keen interest in the luxuries of Ethiopia. He said of entering the emperor's throne room:

> We found a large and rich dais with very splendid carpets. In front of this dais were other curtains of much greater splendor, and while we were standing before them they opened them, for they were drawn together, and there we saw the Prester John sitting on a platform of six

[24] Howgego, "Encyclopedia of Exploration: Too 1800", 636.
[25] Howgego, "Encyclopedia of Exploration: Too 1800", 42.
[26] Raymond John Howgego, "Encyclopedia of Exploration: Too 1800", 42.
[27] CFB Intro of Prester John on Indies Alvarez, 12-13.

> steps very richly adorned. He had on his head a high crown of gold and silver, that is to say, one piece of gold and another of silver from the top downwards, and a silver cross in his hand.[28]

Alvarez gave his readers a detailed description of how the emperor dressed. Alvarez said, "The Prester was dressed in a rich mantle of gold brocade, and silk shirts of wide sleeves which looked like pelotes. From his knees downwards, he had a rich cloth of silk and gold well spread out like a Bishop's apron, and he was sitting in majesty." [29] The lavish detail that Alvarez gave in his description of the court reveals the deep impression it made on him. Since European courts at the time were often judged by their wealth and majesty, the impressive spectacle at the Ethiopian court only would have helped earn the respect of the Portuguese. Alvarez description of the throne room and other Ethiopian material treasures would have also fueled European fantasy about the potential riches in "Prester John's" kingdom and thus reinforced aspects of the Prester John legend.

Perhaps of greater interest than Alvarez's description of the emperors' material wealth was his description of the emperor's physical appearance. He said, "In age, complexion, and stature he is a young man, not very black. His complexion might be chestnut or bay, not very dark in color."[30] It is unclear if Alvarez had an ulterior motive when he noted this description of the emperor's skin tone. To a modern reader, Alvarez's phrases "not very black" and "not very dark in color" seem highly suspect. Based on modern notions of racism, one might be tempted to think of Alvarez's comment that the emperor was "not very black" as a kind of perverse justification for why it was acceptable to revere the emperor. A modern reader might interpret Alvarez's statement as saying, "The Ethiopian emperor is a great man despite being African.

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[28] Francisco Alvarez, *The Prester John of the Indies*, two vols. translated by Lord Stanley of Alderley" edited by C.F. Beckingham and G.W.B. Huntingford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press for The Hakluyt Society, 1961), V1. 196.
[29] Alvarez, v1 197.
[30] Alvarez, v1 197.

Yes, he is black, but he is not *that* black." While it is impossible to say for certain what Alvarez intended by commenting on skin tone, based on when European notions of race developed and began to become racist, it is unlikely that Alvarez's description was an attempt to link lighter African skin tones with "more acceptable" Africans. It is more likely that Alvarez was providing a description the emperor purely for the sake of describing him to his curious European readers, many of whom would have had little to no contact with sub-Saharan Africans. Framework based on racial hierarchy would not develop until the eighteenth-century.[31] It seems that Alvarez truly did not see the emperor's race as a determining factor when considering whether or not to respect him. Just after describing the emperor's race, Alvarez concluded the passage by saying, "In presence and state [the emperor] fully looks like the great lord that he is."[32] In addition, throughout his work, Alvarez refers to the emperor as "His Highness." Alvarez's respect for the emperor seems genuine.

It should be noted that the Ethiopians did not refer to their Emperors as Prester John. This was something only the Europeans did. The scholar of Ethiopian history Stuart Munro-Hay wrote that there is evidence of at least one Ethiopian Emperor commenting on being called Prester John by Europeans. Munro-Hay says that the Emperor Zara Yaqob sent emissaries to Europe where they reported that the emperor "found the name and attribution ridiculous."[33] The Europeans would continue, however, to refer to the Ethiopian Emperors as Prester John.

The Portuguese and Ethiopians initially saw practical benefits to cooperating with one another. The groups saw in each other an ally against Muslims. The Ethiopian emperor asked the diplomats numerous questions about the strength of the "moors" and their military technology. A

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[31] George Frederickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 52-59.
[32] Alvarez, v1 197.
[33] Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia*, 26.

significant part of the conversations between the Portuguese Ambassador and Prester John revolved around suppressing the Turks.[34] The emperor was also interested in establishing trade networks with the Portuguese. Among his chief concerns was acquiring guns. Alvarez recorded that the emperor sent "many messages" to the ambassador "and all were about the arms" that had been promised to him by the King of Portugal.[35]

Alvarez's work also shows how the Portuguese and Ethiopians found common ground in Christianity. Alvarez recorded that the Portuguese Ambassador told one of the emperor's pages that the Portuguese "have great thanks to God for having fulfilled their desires in bringing Christians together with Christians."[36] In turn, the Emperor was interested in the specific religious beliefs of the Portuguese. He asked Alvarez to perform mass for him several times to demonstrate the Catholic way of doing the ceremony.[37] Alvarez and his readers may have interpreted the emperor's request of religious demonstration as a sign that the Ethiopians wanted "true Christianity." Later missionaries who came across this passage could easily have been invigorated by the prospect that Ethiopians would be interested and receptive to "correct" religious practices. The Christian faith, over which Alvarez and the Ethiopian had bonded, helped establish a positive European view of Prester John. The positive view that Alvarez helped shape would carry forward into the seventeenth century. Alvarez's book, which would be read by Europeans who traveled to Ethiopia in the seventeenth century, like Pedro Páez, established the positive attitude towards Ethiopia and its emperor at the beginning of the seventeenth century.[38]

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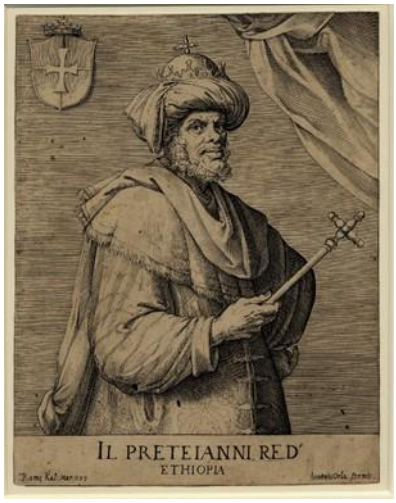
[34] Alvarez, v1 284-286.
[35] Alvarez, v1 288.
[36] Alvarez, v1 271.
[37] Alvarez, v1 289-296.
[38] Pedo Páez, *History of Ethiopia, 1622*, 2 vols. translated by Christopher J. Tribe. edited by Isabel Boavida, Hervé Pennec and Manuel Joao Ramos. London: The Hakluyt Society, 2011), v1 74.

Prester John in Seventeenth-Century Visual Culture

Artwork from the turn of the seventeenth century reveals how Europeans viewed the Ethiopian emperor, a man whom most called, and occasionally still believed, to be Prester John. At this time, the Ethiopian emperor was depicted as being magnificent, regal, and most importantly, Christian. *Il Prete Ianni, Re d'Ethiopia,* which translates to *Prester John, King of Ethiopia,* is a 1599 Italian etching by Luca Ciamberlano.[39] This work depicts a typical example of how the emperor appeared at this time.



Regarded as an important religious figure with ties to the Catholic Church, the emperor is depicted with Christian regalia. Symbolizing his position between the East and West, he wears a headdress that blends an Ottoman turban with a European style crown. A Christian cross juts up from the top of the headdress. The emperor holds a cruciform scepter in his right hand. A coat of arms featuring a cross is depicted. It floats in space above his right shoulder. In addition to these Christian elements, the emperor is shown in a rich multi-layered garment. He stands perfectly erect in half profile. His head is turned to match the gaze of the viewer. The image shows "Prester John" with stylized facial features to highlight his Africanness. This stylization is subtle

[39] British Museum Database, "Il Prete Ianni, Re D'Ethiopia" *British Museum*, 2017.

and was certainly not intended by the artist to disparage the emperor as being African in the way that a nineteenth-century caricature of an African "chief" might.

Il Prete Ianni, Re d'Ethiopia is a powerful image that would rival any seventeenth-century etching of any European monarch. That said, elements in the portrait, such as the turban, make it clear that there was a fascination about the exoticness of "Prester John." Europeans saw Ethiopia's "Prester John" as a powerful and Christian king. They perhaps even viewed him as being equal in power to a European king, but they were always aware that "Prester John" was a foreigner. By placing Ethiopia's "Prester John" into a category of "the exotic other," Europeans were unwittingly severing cultural, religious, and emotional ties that would eventually allow perceptions of Ethiopia and its emperor to become cynical, hostile, and, in later centuries, racist.

Catholics & Prester John in the Seventeenth Century

At the at the start of the seventeenth century, much of the European Catholic interest and reverence toward Ethiopia's "Prester John" was driven by their own self-interests, despite the work that Alvarez had done to craft a positive image of the Ethiopian emperor. This self-interest manifested itself in three ways: an opportunity to convert Ethiopians to Catholicism; establish a political ally in the Muslim-controlled world; and maintain an important seaport that could be used on the way to territories in East Indies.[40] It becomes apparent when examining events related to Ethiopia and "Prester John" during the seventeenth century that when European actors were deprived of what they wanted out of the Ethiopian region and relationship, they quickly began to delegitimize and disregard the emperor. In addition, the European Catholic actors began to cease thinking of and calling the emperor "Prester John."

[40] Martin Meredith, *The Fortunes of Africa*, 172-175.

The Jesuits in Ethiopia regarded the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as heretical. They were compelled by both their personal convictions and direct order from the Church to convert Ethiopians to Catholicism. While the Jesuits were initially successful at converting Ethiopians, and even one of the Ethiopian Emperors, the Jesuits' overreach in the country eventually led to their downfall toward the end of the century.[41] The man who was responsible for leading the Jesuit cause in the early seventeenth century was a Spaniard named Pedro Páez (1564-1622).[42] In 1582, he joined the Society of Jesus and was eventually assigned to a mission in Goa and served in India until 1603. In 1603, following the death of Ethiopia's Jesuit leader Francisco Lopez, Páez traveled to Ethiopia. Páez spent the rest of his life in Ethiopia, and he compiled a history of Ethiopia and a chronicle of his deeds there.[43] His manuscript found its way back to Europe where selections of it were published. In its entirety, Páez's *History of Ethiopia* is one of the most important primary sources on Ethiopia from the early seventeenth century.

Páez believed that the Ethiopian Emperor was not the Prester John of legend. This view is in contrast to many sixteenth-century opinions, although Alvarez did express his own doubts. Why Páez and other seventeenth-century scholars started to diverge from the traditional belief that the Ethiopian emperor was Prester John is debatable. As Páez had read Alvarez, it seems likely that Alvarez's skepticism about the veracity of the Ethiopian emperor being Prester John of legend had rubbed off on him. That said, it seems likely from how Páez wrote about "Prester John" that his opinions stemmed from his firsthand experiences in the region. Páez dedicated a chapter of his book to discussing how the Ethiopian emperor came to be known to Europeans as Prester John. Páez argued that, "As for the reason why people in Europe call the Emperor of

[41] Páez, v1 170.
[42] Raymond John Howgego, *Encyclopedia of Exploration: Too 1800*, 782-783.
[43] Howgego, 782-783.

Ethiopia the Prester John, it may be because, as ordinarily he is a deacon, some Greeks would call him presbyter, and then adding the name Jan which (as we have already said) they gave to the emperor they would come to say [Prester John]."[44] He also thought that the voyage of Pero de Covilhã and his assertion that the Ethiopian Emperor was Prester John added to the confusion.[45] Páez concluded that, "No mention can be found of this name Prester John in the books of Ethiopia, because one of the learned men whom I asked would have known it."[46]

Páez felt that there was enough of a possibility that the Ethiopian emperor was Prester John that it was worth his time to speak to scholars about the issue. Even though he uncovered, to his satisfaction, that the Ethiopian emperor was not the Prester John of legend, Páez still chose to refer to the emperor throughout his work as "Prester John." Páez acknowledged that the Ethiopian emperor was "commonly called the Prester John" by Europeans. He said at the beginning of his work that he would refer to the emperor as Prester John because, "he is better known in Europe by this name than by any other."[47] Páez's writing reflects the first European writing on Ethiopia that questioned and denied the veracity of the Prester John legend. Still, by calling the emperor Prester John, Páez paid homage to a cultural and literary precedent. He was also showing respect for the emperor by calling him by the legendary figure's name. The favorable views that Páez and other Portuguese at the time held of the emperor likely were shaped by having read Alvarez's work.

Despite rejecting the notion that the Ethiopian emperor was Prester John, Páez painted all the emperors that he lived under in Ethiopia in a very favorable light. Most of Páez's book attempts to clearly and truthfully present the reader with facts about Ethiopia and its emperors.

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[44] Páez v1 113.
[45] Páez, v1 113.
[46] Páez, v1 114.
[47] Páez, v1 69.

Páez was particularly interested in Ethiopians' claims that their emperors were descendants of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (whom Páez called the Queen of Saba).[48] Páez included long portions of ancient Ethiopian texts that tell the story of how they were related to King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. He presented this material but did not make any claim as to whether he thought it was true. He merely said that, for the Ethiopians, their claimed biblical lineage "is a very certain and confirmed fact… to the extent that they feel that there can be no controversy of any kind."[49] As a Jesuit missionary, Páez was also interested in the religious beliefs of the Ethiopians. Páez found many of the Ethiopian religious views to be incompatible with Catholicism. He wrote extensively about these differences but prefaced his criticism by saying:

> I shall report their [religious] errors simply and without any form of embellishment, for even in very light-hearted matters it is not appropriate for a religious person to resort to it, and certainly not in such a serious thing as it would be to slander a whole Christian nation and such a great emperor who is so famous throughout the world by resorting to embellishments of words that exaggerated matters in such a way that they might appear to be errors when they are not.[50]

Here Páez revealed his reverence for the Ethiopian emperor and his respect for the Ethiopian "Christian nation." He had a fair amount of success in persuading one of the Ethiopian emperors to accept certain Catholic beliefs, such as the belief that Christ was of two natures and not one.[51] His success at ministering to that emperor could help explain the respect he demonstrated in his writing.

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[48] Páez, v1 85.
[49] Paez, v1 79.
[50] Paez, v1 312.
[51] Paez, v1 321.

Pedro Páez was deeply familiar with European books on Ethiopia and spent a sizable amount of time in his work, *History of Ethiopia,* refuting various claims about the region and Prester John. Páez mentioned Francisco Alvarez's work numerous times in his book. Páez praised Alvarez's writing where he thought it deserved credit but criticized it where he thought it was wrong. Páez took particular issue with the royal genealogy as presented by Alvarez.[52] Páez found it lacking and went about creating a massive family tree for the Ethiopian royal family. Páez was much more critical of another man's scholarship, Friar Luis de Urretta. Friar Luis de Urretta (c.1570-1636) was a Dominican missionary and the author of *Historia de la Etiopia*. Páez regarded what de Urretta wrote in *Historia de la Etiopia* as "mere fictions and prodigiously fabulous things."[53] Páez's tone was much more antagonistic towards de Urretta than Alvarez. One explanation for this is that de Urretta was more of a contemporary of Páez than Alvarez, so Páez saw de Urretta's work as threatening. An even greater factor could have to do with poor relations between the Jesuits and the Dominicans in the seventeenth century. During this time, the Dominicans and Jesuit were feuding over missionary lands and political power in the Portuguese and Spanish royal courts.[54]

Páez' criticism of de Urretta was twofold. Páez thought de Urretta misrepresented the Ethiopians religious beliefs. Páez wrote that de Urretta asserted that Ethiopian religious beliefs closely aligned with Catholicism. He believed this to be false and he named numerous theological differences between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church.[55] Additionally, Páez thought de Urretta included too much fantastical and unsubstantiated material in his "history." For instance, de Urretta wrote that Ethiopian emperors married women who

[52] Paez, v1 105-109.
[53] Páez, v1 170.
[54] Páez, v1 11.
[55] Páez, v1 319.

were descendants of the Three Magi. Páez said that such claims were, "fables and mere fictions, because not only is there no statute saying that the Prester John must always marry a woman from one of the families of these holy kings, but there is no such family in all his empire, nor any memory that there ever has been one."[56] Páez again criticized de Urretta for writing that Ethiopia contained a vast treasure belonging to Prester John. He gave a rational argument against that claim by writing, "it is quite certain that for many years, because of the wars with the Turks, Moors, and Galas and the civil wars, which until a short time ago inflamed this empire, the emperor's income has been so diminished that they have not had any excess to hoard away, and very often they have not even found a source from which they could draw enough for the needs facing them."[57] Páez called de Urretta's treasure "imagined.[58] Páez writing was undoubtedly more accurate than de Urretta's fantastical "history," but Páez's antagonistic tone reveals that he too was challenged to write objectively about de Urretta. One wonders how much liberty Páez took with his account just to refute an account from his Dominican rival.

The Destruction of Catholic-Ethiopian Relations

By the middle of the seventeenth century, the Jesuits would be expelled from Ethiopia by "Prester John" himself. This tumultuous period was chronicled in a firsthand account by the Portuguese Jesuit missionary, Jerónimo Lobo (1595-1678). His work, *Voyage to Abyssinia*, would become a highly influential work about Ethiopia and Prester John that would be read by many Europeans over the next one hundred years. His account is also incredibly important to the

[56] Páez, v1 177.
[57] Páez, v1 136.
[58]" Páez, v1 132.

contemporary study of the Prester John legend in that it reflects the beginning of shifting European attitudes about the legend and Ethiopia.

Jerónimo Lobo was the son of Francisco Lobo da Gama, the Governor of Cape Verde. His upper-class status allowed him to attend college, study theology at Coimbra, and eventually become a Jesuit.[59] As a Jesuit, he was first sent to a mission in India. In 1622, he was reassigned to the Ethiopian mission. When Lobo attempted to travel to his new post, Turkish and African tribal threats prevented him from reaching Ethiopia.[60] It would not be until 1625 that he was able to reach Ethiopia. By 1625, the former Ethiopian Jesuit Patriarch, Pedro Páez, had died. Lobo arrived in Ethiopia to serve under the new Patriarch, Alfonso Mendes.[61] The Patriarch Mendes was able to win over the Ethiopian Emperor Susenyos and get him to swear allegiance to the Pope. This stronger relationship between the Jesuits and the Ethiopian Emperor led to an influx of Jesuits and greater power in Ethiopia for the organization. The relationship ended with Emperor Susenyos' death in 1632, and with the late emperor's son, Fasiladas, ascension to the Ethiopian throne. Weary of the Jesuits growing power, the emperor sent Mendes into exile. While Mendes eventually made it back to Portugal, other Jesuits were not as lucky. Some were executed by Emperor Fasiladas. Lobo was able to escape from Ethiopia and several decades later wrote an account of his time there.[62] Likely deeply resentful of Emperor Fasiladas, Lobo wrote that the ethiopian emperors, who had been honored with the title "Prester John" for so long, were, in fact, nothing but commoners who ascended to power through violence.[63]

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[59]Howgego, 643.
[60] Howgego, 642.
[61]Howgego, 703.
[62] Howgego, 703.
[63] Jerónimo Lobo, *A Voyage to Abyssinia*, Translated by Samuel Johnson, (London: Elliot and Kay, 1789), 62-65

Jerónimo Lobo's memoir, *A Voyage to Abyssinia*, chronicled his experiences in Ethiopia until Emperor Fasiladas exiled the Jesuits in 1634. Although Lobo wrote the text in the 1640s, it was not published until 1728 when Abbé Joachim le Grand translated the work into French. The work was subsequently translated into English by Samuel Johnson in 1735.[64] Lobo's work represents a major turning point in the history of the Prester John legend. In examining *A Voyage to Abyssinia,* one begins to see European attitudes shifting away from the long-held optimistic views of Prester John to more pessimistic ones. One sees from Lobo's work that around the mid-seventeenth century, Europeans began to not only question the veracity of an Ethiopian "Prester John" but also whether Ethiopia and its emperor should be treated friendly at all. In Lobo's case, he flatly denied that the Ethiopian Emperor was or had ever been Prester John. The romantic and reverent views of Prester John that Europeans held, especially by Catholic clergymen, were now ending.

In *A Voyage to Abyssinia,* Lobo devoted an entire chapter to refuting the notion that Prester John, if he truly existed, was ever in Ethiopia. [65] He directly questioned claims by Europeans and the Ethiopians themselves that Ethiopian Emperors were descendants of major Biblical figures like Noah and King Solomon. Lobo stated that, "from the Wars with which this empire hath been shaken in these later ages we may justly believe that like all others it suffered its revolutions and that the history of the Abyssins is corrupted with fables."[66] Directly attacking the biblical lineage of the Emperor was not something Páez would have done just a few decades before.

[64] Lobo, 62-64.
[65] Lobo, 62.
[66] Lobo, 62-63.

By attacking the Ethiopian emperor's alleged biblical genealogy, Lobo undermined the shared religious heritage that had for so long been a key component to Europeans' positive relations with Ethiopia and "Prester John." On the subject of how the Portuguese claim to view Ethiopia as the kingdom of Prester John, Lobo wrote:

> Many things concurred to make [the Portuguese] of this opinion: there was no Christian kingdom or state in the Indies of which all was true which they heard of this land of Prester John and there was none in the other parts of the world which was a Christian separated from the Catholic church but what was known except this kingdom of Ethiopia. It has therefore passed for the kingdom of Prester John since the time that it was discovered by the Portuguese in the reign of King John the second.[67]

The phrase "passed for" is a key indication of Lobo's strong feelings. The reason for Lobo's pessimistic attitudes undoubtedly can be traced, at least in part, to his anger over the exile of his fellow Jesuits and possibly even to prejudice against the Ethiopian Orthodox Church that had helped in the Jesuit expulsion.

Chapter One Conclusion

The seventeenth century began with European Catholic skepticism toward the notion of an Ethiopian Prester John—but still with a feeling of reverence for Ethiopia's emperor and positive attitudes toward the Christian people of Ethiopia. The century ended, however, with European Catholic pessimism about Ethiopia's emperor and its people. The idea that the emperor could honorifically wear the title "Prester John" was over. European Catholic writers on the region grew to feel that Ethiopia was not a place worthy of their respect and admiration. The expulsion of the Jesuits and the fact that Europeans no longer faced a direct threat from Muslim

[67] Lobo, 63.

invasion—and thus no longer needed an ally in the East African region—were major factors in the deterioration of European Catholic relations with the Ethiopians. The belief in and respect for the Ethiopian "Prester John" was a casualty of these changes. It would be half a century before Europeans attempted to reestablish diplomatic and trade relations with Ethiopia.

Chapter Two:
European Failure to Reestablish Diplomatic Relations with Ethiopia and the Subsequent Scholarly Dismissal of Prester John in the Eighteenth Century

Introduction to Chapter Two

From the elevated status the Prester John legend enjoyed in the sixteenth century, to the seeds of doubt sewn in the seventeenth century, European reverence for the Prester John legend and their belief in its relevance to the Ethiopian people showed steady decline in the eighteenth century. This decline in the eighteenth century occurred in distinct phases. The first phase was a result of the expulsion of Jesuits and other westerners from Ethiopia by Emperor Fasiladas years earlier in the 1630s. This new phase saw attempts by the Dutch and French to establish their own relationships with Ethiopia and its emperor.[68] While the Catholic French were interested in both the establishment of trade and reintroducing Catholicism to Ethiopia, the Protestant Dutch were only interested in establishing trade routes.[69] Although numerous attempts were made at establishing relations with Ethiopia and its emperor during this first period of the eighteenth century, Europeans were unable to do so.

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[68] Richard Pankhurst, "Armenian Involvement in Ethiopian-Asian Trade: 16th to 18th Centuries," In *Armenians in Asian trade in the Early Modern Era,* Edited by Sushil Chaudhury and Kéram Kévonian (Portugal: Les Editions de la MSH, 2008), 128.

[69] Raymond John Howgego, *Encyclopedia of Exploration: To 1800* (Australia: Horden House, 2003), 849.

The second phase of the eighteenth century saw little actual exploration of Ethiopia by Europeans, but there were many intellectual debates among scholars about the country and Prester John. By this point, no one believed that Ethiopia was ruled by a magical Christian king. The idea of Prester John was recognized as having been nothing more than legend. European scholars, however, were interested in how that legend came to be. For some scholars, they believed that those early European explorers in Ethiopia were misguided in attempting to find Prester John in Africa. These scholars believed that the origins of the Prester John of legend lay in the Far East. Others, however, contended that the Prester John legend did have Ethiopian origins. At this time, there was also a feud between Protestant and Catholic scholars over certain academic questions about Ethiopia. These questions included whether the emperor was an ancestor of King Solomon and whether the original Prester John letter was actually referencing Ethiopia.

Hiob Ludolf and the Beginnings of Scholarly Enquiry into Prester John

At the end of the seventeenth century, Europeans became re-interested in establishing relations with Ethiopia. Ethiopians, in turn, also became interested in re-establishing relations with Europe. The individual who arguably had the greatest impact on efforts to rekindle European-Ethiopian relations was the German "Orientalist" Hiob Ludolf (1624-1704). Ludolf felt it was his personal mission in life to study Ethiopia and help re-establish relations with the country.[70] In Ludolf's mind, these relations should be commercial in nature and not religious as they had been previously.[71] He dedicated his academic career to studying Ethiopia. One of his most important works was a history of the country which was published in 1681. The work's full

[70] Pankhurst, "Armenian Involvement in Ethiopian-Asian Trade: 16th to 18th Centuries," 134.
[71] Pankhurst, "Armenian Involvement in Ethiopian-Asian Trade: 16th to 18th Centuries,"134.

title was *A New History of Ethiopia*: *Being a Full and Accurate Description of The Kingdom of Abyssinia, Vulgarly, though Erroneously Called The Empire of Prester John.* This title gives an obvious hint to Ludolf's take on the Prester John legend's veracity as it related to Ethiopia.

While Ludolf strongly believed in reconnecting Ethiopia and Europe, he did not believe that the Prester John of legend was ever located in Ethiopia. In his work *A New History of Ethiopia*, which was translated into English in 1684, Ludolf wrote, "The King of the [Ethiopia] has been hitherto known to the Europeans by no other title than that of Presbyter John, which was first given him by the Portuguese."[72] Ludolf cited the Portuguese's fantastical accounts of their expeditions to Ethiopia in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as the inception for Europeans' notion of an Ethiopian Prester John.[73] He correctly pointed out that the Portuguese erroneously believed that the Christian king they found in Ethiopia was indeed the fabled Prester John. Ludolf places some blame for this mistaken identity on the misleading information provided by an Ethiopian ambassador, Tzagazaabus, and the Armenian merchant Mattheus.[74]

Although Ludolf did not believe in the Ethiopian Prester John legend, he placed the historical figure of Prester John in Asia.[75] Ludolf wrote that when Pope Alexander III received the letter of Prester John in the twelfth century, "the real Prester John was reigning in Asia."[76] Addtionally, he argued that in the original Prester John letter (or epistle as he calls it), "[Nothing is] to be gathered [out] of that whole Epistle that has any Relation to Africa, Ethiopia, or the King of the [Ethiopians]."[77] Scholarly approaches to the Prester John legend in the next century, particularly by Protestant scholars, would closely resemble Ludolf's reasoning. Ludolf believed

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[72] Hiob Ludolf, *A New History of Ethiopia,* Translated by J.P. Gent (London: Samuel Smith, 1684), 151.
[73] Ludolf, 151.
[74] Ludolf, 2.
[75] Ludolf, 151.
[76] Ludolf, 381.
[77] Ludolf, 381.

in rationality over fantasy and in the careful analysis of the historical record. He lived in the time of the European Enlightenment, and he was very much a scholar.

Failed Attempts to Reestablish Relations with the Kingdom of Prester John

After the publication of his history of Ethiopia, Ludolf continued his mission to reunite Ethiopia and Europe. In 1683, Hiob Ludolf made great strides in this attempt. At the order of an elector of Palatinate, the German territory in which Ludolf lived, Ludolf was tasked with traveling to various European countries to establish a coalition against the Turks. It was the elector's hope that this coalition would also include Ethiopia. Ludolf saw this trip as an opportunity to establish a trade network between England and Ethiopia. Ludolf's attempts at forming the coalition and establishing the trade deal with the English fell through, however.[78] Refusing to give up on his dream of a trade network between Europe and Ethiopia, Ludolf sent out a series of letters proclaiming the benefits of Ethiopia's re-entrance into the "European comity of nations."[79] These letters were addressed European trade organizations (like the Dutch East India Company) as well as to the Ethiopian Emperor himself. Incredibly, through a series of Dutch merchants and traders, the Ethiopian Emperor Iyasu I received Ludolf's letter. Iyasu I, like his predecessor Emperor Fasiladas, was wary of the Catholic Church and its potential conflicts with the Ethiopian Orthodox church. Ultimately, however, Iyasu I agreed that Ethiopia had been without contact to Europeans for too long. In 1690, Iyasu I sent an ambassador bearing gifts to Batavia, the capital of the Dutch East Indies.[80] With that gesture by the Emperor, Ludolf's work seemed to be paying off. Ludolf's success, however, would prove to be short-lived.

[78] John Waterman, "Biographical Sketches," 5.
[79] Pankhurst, "Armenian Involvement in Ethiopian-Asian Trade: 16th to 18th Centuries,"134.
[80] Pankhurst, "Armenian Involvement in Ethiopian-Asian Trade: 16th to 18th Centuries,"134.

In response to Emperor Iyasu I sending an ambassador to the Dutch East Indies, the Dutch sent several trading ships loaded with goods to Ethiopia. For whatever reason, however, these ships were not able to reach Ethiopia, and it was reported that they returned to harbor with the same goods with which they had left.[81] In 1699, the Dutch dispatched two ambassadors to Ethiopia to deliver gifts and a letter to the Ethiopian Emperor. These men traveled with an Ethiopian emissary who had arrived in Batavia on behalf of the Ethiopian Emperor. When the Dutch and the Ethiopian reached Mocha in what is now modern-day Yemen, the emissary informed thme that they were not permitted to enter Ethiopia. This emissary claimed that the Dutchmen were "without the permission from the King of Kings."[82] The refusal to allow the Ethiopian emissary to travel with their gifts to Ethiopia forced the Dutchmen to call off their mission. After getting wind of this situation, Hiob Ludolf, wrote another letter to the Ethiopian Emperor in 1701. Frustrated and confused, Ludolf said that the actions of the emissary had caused the Dutch "misgivings" about the relationship with Ethiopia. He argued that the Dutch were friends of the Emperor and wanted to trade "for the benefit of all men."[83] He advised the emperor to send a new emissary to Holland with a letter affirming relations with the Dutch. Unlike Ludolf's previous letter, however, this new letter went unanswered by the emperor.[84] Although it is unclear why this new letter went unanswered, what is clear is that by not receiving an answer, the relationship with the Ethiopian Emperor and the Netherlands did not improve.

At the same time that Ludolf and the Dutch were failing to gain entrance into Ethiopia, the French, however, were making progress. Emperor Iyasu I was at this time plagued by a skin condition. He ordered that an emissary venture to Cairo to find a suitable doctor for him. The

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[81] Pankhurst, "Armenian Involvement in Ethiopian-Asian Trade: 16th to 18th Centuries,"136.
[82] Pankhurst, "Armenian Involvement in Ethiopian-Asian Trade: 16th to 18th Centuries,"138.
[83] Pankhurst, "Armenian Involvement in Ethiopian-Asian Trade: 16th to 18th Centuries,"138.
[84] Pankhurst, "Armenian Involvement in Ethiopian-Asian Trade: 16th to 18th Centuries,"138.

man that was found was a French Physician named Charles Poncet.[85] Very little is known about Poncet or what his reasons were for agreeing to go to Ethiopia, but what is known is that he left Cairo in 1698 with Charles Francois Xavier de Brevedent, a French Jesuit with aims at re-establishing the Jesuits' hold in Ethiopia. The pair arrived in Ethiopia in 1699, but Brevedent soon died of an illness. Poncet made it to Gondar where he dealt successfully with the Emperor[86] Poncet began his return from Ethiopia in 1700. By the time he reached Cairo in 1701, his knowledge of Ethiopia was in demand by officials back in France and the Pope. Based on his meeting with Poncet, the pope believed the Church had a new foothold in Ethiopia. The Pope dispatched a Franciscan envoy to Ethiopia. Although this group did reach Ethiopia, their stay was short. They returned to Rome by 1703.[87] Charles Poncet's visit to Ethiopia also sparked Emperor Iyasu I's interest in France. When Poncet returned to Paris in 1701, he carried with him gifts for King Louis XIV and a letter from the Ethiopian Emperor. Poncet was welcomed at court by the king. The king, like the pope, also showed interest in establishing relations with the Ethiopians.[88]

The Ethiopian emperor wanted to go further with establishing relations with the French. In a gesture of diplomacy, the emperor dispatched an emissary to King Louis XIV of France.[89] This gesture was particularly significant as it was the first time that an Ethiopian emissary had been sent to a Catholic state in Europe for over two hundred years. The emperor kept this mission secret because he feared angering the Ethiopian Orthodox priests who despised the

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[85] Ronald S. Love, "A French Physician at the Court of Gondar: Poncet's Ethiopia in the 1690s," Journal of the Western Society for French History, Volume 31 (2003). Online.
[86] Howgego, 849.
[87] Howgego, 849.
[88] Pankhurst, "Armenian Involvement in Ethiopian-Asian Trade: 16th to 18th Centuries,"140.
[89] Love, "A French Physician at the Court of Gondar: Poncet's Ethiopia in the 1690s."

Catholics.[90] The emissary was sent off on his secret mission, but when he reached Cairo, the emissary was informed that if he traveled to France he would not be accepted at the French court. Almost 90 years later, the Scottish explorer of Ethiopia and writer James Bruce, commented on this great rebuff by the French. Bruce said, "in France they looked upon [the Ethiopian emissary] in the same light as they did an embassy from Algiers or Tunis, which did no honor…to those who received it."[91] There are several possible reasons why the French did not allow the Ethiopians to enter their court. One potential answer is that the French did not view the Ethiopians as worthy. If this is correct, it would be evidence of a decrease in respect for the Ethiopians. Another possible explanation, one that is more straightforward, is that the French court did not have time to accept the emissary and explore relations with Ethiopia because the court was busy dealing an escalating conflict, the War of Spanish Succession (1701-1710). Regardless of the reason, refusing to accept the Ethiopians at court certainly hampered relations between the Ethiopians and France.

Although the French refused to receive an Ethiopian at court, they did find it acceptable to send their own agents to Ethiopia. French attempts at sending agents, however, led to tragedy and created European scorn for Ethiopia that would put an end to the attempts at reestablishing relations. In 1704, in response to meeting Poncet, it was decided in Paris that the French consul to Egypt, Charles de Maillet, should send an emissary to Ethiopia. The man who was chosen for the job was the vice-consul to Egypt, Lenoir du Roule.[92] The vice-consul was to travel the same route as Poncet. Lenoir du Roule's official mission was to carry a letter written by de Maillet that intended to heal any hurt feelings the emperor might have over his emissary being rejected by the

[90] Pankhurst, "Armenian Involvement in Ethiopian-Asian Trade: 16th to 18th Centuries,"138.
[91] Pankhurst, "Armenian Involvement in Ethiopian-Asian Trade: 16th to 18th Centuries,"139.
[92] Howgego, 849.

French court. The letter assured the emperor that although his emissary had been denied entry into France, the letter from the emperor carried by the emissary was taken by a Frenchman to the court. The Consul also assured the emperor that the emissary had been very well treated while he was in Cairo.[93] In their assurances, one can see that the French were attempting to patch relations after they rebuffed the Ethiopian emissary.

Despite sending a letter with vice-consul du Roule, it would never reach the Ethiopian emperor. Vice-consul du Roule arrived in the Muslim controlled city of Sennar on the edge of the Ethiopian border in 1705. During his departure to the Ethiopian city of Gondar, du Roule and his companions were murdered by locals. The Ethiopian Emperor Takla Haymanot (Iyasu I's successor) immediately condemned the actions by the Muslims in a letter addressed to the Muslim leaders of Cairo.[94] Many French (and other Europeans for that matter), perhaps lacking an understanding of the regional nuances, would come to see the murder of du Roule and his party as a sort of betrayal on the part of the Ethiopian emperor. The death of du Roule was a watershed moment in the history of relations between Europe and Ethiopia. In many ways, it marks a turning point where European stopped believing that Ethiopia could be a part of the European comity of nations and started to see Ethiopia as a lesser nation. This, along with the existing religious prejudice and the development of racial prejudice in Europe, would have radical effects on how European scholars in the second part of the eighteenth century wrote about the Prester John legend.

These events coincided with another occurrence that further put to rest eighteenth century hopes of re-establishing strong relations with Ethiopia, the Zemana Masafint.[95] Translated as the

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[93] Pankhurst, "Armenian Involvement in Ethiopian-Asian Trade: 16th to 18th Centuries,"141.
[94] Howgego, 849.
[95] Stuart Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia, The Unknown Land: A Cultural and Historical Guide* (London: L.B. Tauris Publishers, 2002), 100.

"Era of the Princes," the Zemana Masafint was a period in Ethiopia of political turmoil during which the country turned inward to handle its internal conflicts. The Solomonic dynasty of the Ethiopian Emperors was challenged by rival factions at the Ethiopian court. In 1766 the Emperor was forced to appoint a supreme military commander to keep order. This new military, Mikael Sehul of Tigray, was known as the "Ras."[96] Ras Mikael became so powerful that the Emperor and those who proceeded him became puppets for their military commanders. The Emperor lost control of the country and it fractured into principalities. While the Emperor kept his title of Emperor, he functioned more as the King of Gondar.[97] This period was defined by its political violence and instability. Ethiopia was too splintered to successfully engage with the outside world. This period would last for nearly a hundred years, well into the nineteenth century.

Eighteenth Century Scholarly Debate Over Prester John & Ethiopia

After the renewed interest in Ethiopia at the beginning of the eighteenth century and the various trips to the country by Europeans, scholars in Europe began trying to make sense of what had occurred and how to move forward. Scholars of Ethiopia at this time were still writing about Prester John. While they no longer believed that this legendary Christian king existed in Africa, they were very interested in how Europeans came to believe something so unbelievable. Much effort went into tracking the origins of the myth. The analysis of the Prester John at this time often reveals insight into the researcher's feelings about Ethiopia and any agenda they might have.

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[96] Stuart Munro-Hay, 100-101.
[97] Stuart Munro-Hay, 100-101.

Perhaps the most important scholar of Ethiopia in the first third of the eighteenth century was the Frenchman Joachim Legrand (1653-1733). Legrand first became interested in Ethiopia while serving as the secretary to the French ambassador to Portugal in the 1690s. Legrand was considered by French society to be a fine researcher and well-traveled. He was also highly regarded for his command of foreign languages. All of these things led France's ambassador to Portugal to offer the job of secretary to Legrand.[98] While serving in his role as secretary, Legrand became fascinated with Portugal's long history with Ethiopia. He poured over records from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that related to Ethiopia. Years of research and his knowledge of diplomatic affairs led Legrand to become a scholar of Ethiopia. In 1728, Legrand published the first French translation of Jeronimo Lobo's *A Voyage to Abyssinia.* In that work, Legrand also wrote dissertations on Ethiopian history (including one on Prester John) and wrote a history of the recent French interactions with Ethiopia (including the murder of du Roule in 1704).

While Legrand was deeply interested in Ethiopia, he was highly critical of the country and its people. His writing reflected the much more critical European attitude towards Ethiopia, one based on racial prejudice. In his writings about Ethiopia, Legrand no longer used the title Prester John to venerate the Emperors. Only in discussions of the legend itself does the name ever come up. Another example of the new critical stance is seen in Legrand's writing about the recent failed attempts to re-establish relations and du Roule's death at the hands of Africans. Legrand attacked Ethiopian piety by including an interpretation by Poncet who said, "how nice the nation, and particularly the clergy, are in everything that bears the least relation to religion."[99]

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[98] John C Rule. and Ben S. Trotter, *A World of Paper: Louis XIV, Colbert de Torcy, and the Rise of the Information State* (Canada: McGill-Queen's Press, 2014), Note: The page number is not listed in this book. The passage regarding Legrand can be found in Chapter 2 around citation number 250.
[99] Joachim Legrand, "Fifteen Dissertations on Various Subjects, Relating to the Antiquities, Government, Religion, Manners, and Natural History of Abyssinia," In *A Voyage to Abyssinia,* Translated by Samuel Johnson (London: Elliot and Kay, 1789), 183.

Legrand dismissed the prospect of Ethiopia being a part of the European "comity of nations" as Ludolf had once suggested it could be. Legrand wrote that penetrating Ethiopia was costly, but he highlighted that more importantly, "establishing a trade, and the Catholic religion in the country is…a design which, to all who have any knowledge of the empire and its inhabitants, will appear chimerical and impracticable."[100]In addition to his obvious religious prejudice toward the Ethiopians, it seems that Legrand may have also harbored racial prejudice as well. In his criticism of Ethiopians, Legrand wrote that the Ethiopian people, "detest the Europeans [and that] their aversion even extends to everything that is white."[101] His categorization as the Europeans as white and the Ethiopians as not being white and hating whites is something entirely new that had never before been seen in European writings about Ethiopia. The scholar of racial history George Frederickson argues that clearly developed notions of a "pan-European" "white race" did not develop until the early eighteenth century.[102] Legrand's writing fits with Frederickson's timeline for the development of racial categorization.

When it came to the legend of Prester John, Legrand was highly skeptical that Ethiopia ever had a historical figure that one might identify as being the "real" Prester John. Instead, in a dissertation on the subject of Prester John, Legrand wrote:

> The Abyssins were much addicted to pilgrimages into the Holy-Land; and this temper prevailed most among them at the time when the French went often into Asia to carry on their wars in those countries. It was from their conversations with the Abyssins that they learned the appellation of Prester or Priest-John; for those people, to raise the higher idea of their monarch, added to his other offices and titles that of priesthood.[103]

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[100] Legrand, "Fifteen Dissertations," 186.
[101] Legrand, "Fifteen Dissertations," 183.
[102] George M. Frederickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 54.
[103] Legrand, "Fifteen Dissertations," 248.

From this passage one can grasp Legrand's basic argument. French crusaders, having made contact with Ethiopian pilgrims in the Holy Land, were told of the Ethiopian king who also bore the title of Priest. From this, the legend of Prester John grew. As the title of Priest was shared by multiple Ethiopian emperors across the centuries, the French crusaders likely were told of different Emperors at different times. Legrand also believes that tales of the far east from individuals like Marco Polo may also have fueled the Prester John legend. Legrand rejected the notion of Marco Polo, one supported by Ludolf, that Prester John was a Christian Mongol Khan.[104]

Samuel Johnson, Prester John, and the Protestant Perspective

The writings of scholar Samuel Johnson offer insight into the English perspective of Ethiopia and the scholarship surrounding it. Johnson published the first English translation of Jeronimo Lobo's *A Voyage to Abyssinia* in 1735. It was later reprinted in 1789. In addition to Lobo's work, Johnson included Legrand's dissertations on Ethiopia. In his publication, Johnson used his preface to advance his own ideas about Ethiopia. In many instances, Johnson attacked Legrand and praised Ludolf. Some of Johnson's criticism for Legrand may have stemmed from Legrand being a Frenchman (as relations between France and England at this time were particularly tense). It may also be that he viewed Legrand critically because of Legrand's Catholic faith.

In his preface, Johnson criticized Legrand's scholarship for having a Catholic and French bias. Johnson said Legrand was, "writing only to Frenchmen and to papists."[105] Johnson was

[104] Legrand, "Fifteen Dissertations," 241.
[105] Samuel Johnson, Preface to *A Voyage to Abyssinia*, Translated by Samuel Johnson (London: Elliot and Kay, 1789), 13.

highly critical of the Catholics who he felt had done wrong by the Ethiopians. Johnson believed that Ethiopians are practicing a corrupted form of Christianity but that the Catholics were not helping them find true Christianity. Of the Ethiopians, Johnson said:

> Let us suppose an inhabitant of some remote and superior region [an Ethiopian], yet unskilled in the ways of men, having read and considered the precepts of the gospel, and the example of our savior, to come down in search of the true church: If he would not enquire after it among the cruel, the insolent, and the oppressive, among those who are continually grasping at dominion over souls as well as bodies; among those who are employed in procuring to themselves impunity for the most enormous villainies, and studying methods of destroying their fellow-creatures, not for their crimes but their errors: If he would not expect to meet benevolence engaged in massacres, or to find mercy in a court of inquisition, he would not look for the true church in the church of Rome.[106]

From the writings of Johnson, one can see how scholars at this time became divided along Protestant and Catholic lines as well as national lines. Johnson makes no mention of Prester John in the preface to his translation. Protestants seem to have been less concerned with the Prester John legend and often excluded mention of the topic in the eighteenth century. This may have been in an effort to appear more intellectual and unconcerned with what by that point was known to be a fantastical legend. It may also have something to do with Protestants aversion to venerating anything or anyone that was not scripture. This included rejecting Catholic stories of miracles and religious wonders like those found in the Prester John legend.

Johnson, who was of course not a believer in the Ethiopian Prester John, praised Lobo for his unembellished description of Ethiopia. He wrote that Lobo, "contrary to the general vein of his countrymen, has amused his reader with no romantic absurdities or incredible fictions:

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[106] Johnson, Preface, 13.

whatever he relates, whether true or not, is at least probable; and he who tells nothing exceeding the bounds of probability, has a right to demand, that they should believe him who cannot contradict him."[107] From the above quotation, one gets a better sense of what Johnson valued in the earlier accounts of Ethiopia. Johnson was an extremely rational man and major figure in the English Enlightenment. Although he could not go to the country himself, he wanted to have a clear picture of the country. From Lobo's grounded account of Ethiopia, it seems reasonable that Johnson would have seen in Lobo somewhat of a kindred spirit intellectually. After all, Johnson took the time to translate Lobo's work. He clearly found the work worthy of study. As a Protestant and man of the Enlightenment, it seems undoubtable that Johnson would have found the idea improbable of an Ethiopian Prester John as having existed. Lobo's intellectual style and strong skepticism about Prester John almost certainly would have informed Johnson's opinion on the legend.

Although Johnson likely did not subscribe to the notion of an Ethiopian Prester John, he viewed Ethiopians, as described by Lobo, as being a decent group of people. He wrote that when reading Lobo's description of Ethiopians, "[the reader] will discover, what will always be discovered by a diligent and impartial enquirer, that wherever human nature is to be found, there is a mixture of vice and virtue, a contest of passion and reason; and that the Creator doth not appear partial in his distributions, but has balanced in most countries their particular inconveniences by particular favours."[108] The previous quotation is a remarkably progressive statement for its time. Unfortunately, as the British began to get more directly involved in Ethiopia in the decades after Johnson wrote those words, they would lose sight of Ethiopian humanity.

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[107] Johnson, Preface, 13.
[108] Johnson, Preface, 13.

Chapter Two Conclusion

By examining European scholarly writing on Ethiopia from the eighteenth century, one is able to see the beginnings of hostile feelings towards the Ethiopians on the part of Europeans. The failed attempts to re-establish relations with Ethiopia caused Europeans to become more critical of Ethiopia and its people than ever before. This impacted the European' assessment of the Prester John legend and how European explorers in the third part of the eighteenth century interacted and wrote about the Ethiopian emperor, who had been so highly venerated by Europeans only a century earlier. These developments became the foundation for imperialism in the nineteenth century. In the next century, opinions towards Ethiopia and the Prester John legend become even more hostile, leading to direct military conflict between the British and the Ethiopians. Nineteenth-Century Europeans, specifically the British, would also satirize the Prester John legend in order to make Africans look foolish, savage, and necessary to "civilize" and control.

Chapter Three:
British Imperialism and the End of Prester John in the Nineteenth Century

Introduction to Chapter Three

During the imperialist period in Africa, the Prester John legend posed a significant intellectual threat to the justifications used by imperialists for exploration, imperialism, and the colonization of Africa. This threat led to fundamental changes to how Europeans, specifically the British, saw the Prester John legend. Gone were the days of armchair academics trading scholarly barbs about the merits of the Prester John legend. Beginning before the imperialistic

era in the late nineteenth century and lasting to the end of the imperialist era in Africa in the early twentieth century, Britons with interests in Africa either chose to ignore the Prester John legend or satirize it in a way that made Africans look foolish. British imperialist hostilities towards the Prester John legend can be explained by understanding how the imperialists needed to portray Africans to justify their conquests. Prester John represented Africans as powerful, Christian, civilized, and culturally significant; in other words, the antithesis of how Europeans wanted them portrayed. All of Prester John's characteristics stood in direct opposition to the justifications for going into Africa. Chief among those justifications was the "civilizing mission." With regards to Prester John, the imperialist mindset did not want to answer the questions, "How can you civilize one who is already civilized? How can you convert one who is already Christian?" At first, the British ignored the legend entirely; later, they began to satirize it.

British "Discovery" in the Kingdom of "Prester John"

By the late eighteenth century, Europeans, and specifically the British, began to set and achieve lofty exploratory goals in Africa. Exploration was, of course, the first step in the colonization and subjugation of faraway places. There was, however, another element to setting and achieving exploratory goals. By venturing into the unknown and filling in the blank spaces on the map, the British were making statements about their place in the world. They intended to show that there was no place they could not go, no river they could not cross, and no mountain they could not climb. To the British, exploration had become a test of their courage, intelligence, and will as men. No better example of this can be seen than the cover of the first edition of infamous African explorer Henry Morton Stanley's autobiography. The cover featured a foil-stamped image of the African continent. Running through the image is a dotted line labeled "H.M.S," which shows the literal and metaphorical trail Stanley cut through the heart of the

continent. Encircling the image of the continent are two Congo words in foil: Bula Matari. The words represent the moniker given by the Congolese to Stanley when he was working in the Congo on behalf King Leopold of Belgium's murderous regime in the late nineteenth century.[109] "Bula Matari" loosely translates to "The Rock Breaker." Within the context of this book cover with "Bula Matari" encircling the African continent, spilt in half by the trail Stanley blazed, the message can be assumed as saying that Africa was the rock, and Stanley broke it.

This period in the history of exploration is an often written-about one as many great "adventures" took place. The historian Richard Holmes dubbed this period the "Age of Wonder."[110] The historian Miles Bredin said of this period that, "intellectual discovery was of immense importance – voyages to the far side of the world and the finding of new plants and creatures were all followed with keen interest."[111] The exploratory tales of men and women like Stanley figuratively and literally hacked their way through deep jungles to solve geographic and cultural mysteries for God and country. These efforts were seen as romantic, and those tales cannot be separated from the egregious imperialist acts perpetrated on native peoples. Put simply, exploration enabled the exploitation. In some cases, they even went hand in hand.

One of the early figures in this period of British exploration was James Bruce, a man who David Livingstone would one day call "a greater traveler" than any man of that time.[112] Unlike the Portuguese explorers and missionaries of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the eighteenth-century Scottish explorer James Bruce did not travel to Ethiopia with a religious or political goal. Bruce aimed to "discover" the source of the Nile River in Ethiopia in order to win glory for

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[109] Henry M. Stanley, *The Autobiography of Henry M. Stanley*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1909).
[110] Miles Bredin, "James Bruce: Charm and Courage in Abyssinia" in *The Great Explorers* edited by Robin Hanbury-Tenison (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010), 121.
[111] Bredin, "James Bruce: Charm and Courage in Abyssinia," 121.
[112] Bredin, "James Bruce: Charm and Courage in Abyssinia," 125.

himself and Britain. The source of the Nile had been a geographic mystery since the time of Herodotus, and great personal glory would awaited the explorer who could locate its source. Discovering the source of the Nile had been considered the greatest prize in exploration. Even Roman emperors had sent expeditions to find the source of the river that was Egypt's lifeblood. In Bruce's day, the source's elusiveness was regarded as "the opprobrium of geographers."[113] Bruce believed that the Blue Nile (and not the White Nile) was the primary stream that fed into the famous Egyptian section of the river. Most geographers in the eighteenth century disagreed with Bruce and instead believed that the White Nile was the primary stream. It would not be until the 1930s that Bruce's position was validated by hydrologists. Although Bruce claimed to be the first European to discover the source, it had actually been reached by Pedro Paez over a hundred years before. Bruce attempted to discredit Paez's claim to the discovery in *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*.[114]

In addition to being an important figure in the history of exploration, Bruce's *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* offers the opportunity to see how the debates about Prester John in the earlier part of the 18th century shaped views later in the 18th century. Bruce subscribed to much of what the seventeenth century Ethiopia scholar Hiob Ludolf had to say about Ethiopia, and in many instances throughout Bruce's published work, Bruce is in direct conversation with earlier Ethiopia scholars of the 18th century. Bruce even went as far as to take some of those early scholarly works with him to Ethiopia, thinking they would be helpful. In his account of his travels, Bruce reveals that one of the books he took was a Ludolf's Ethiopian dictionary.[115]

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[113] Alan Morehead, *The Blue Nile* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1962), 27.
[114] Alan Morehead, *The Blue Nile* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1962), 27.
[115] James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile, in the Years 1768, 1770, 1771, 1772, and 1773* (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1790) Vol 1, 200.

At the start of his life, James Bruce (1730-1794) seemed to be destined to be a professor or a lawyer, but several random incidents led him down the path to becoming one of the famed early British explorers. Born to a wealthy family in Kinnaird Scotland, Bruce had the good fortune of being formally educated by tutors in London from the age of six until the age of twelve. After this, Bruce attended the Harrow school in Scotland where he was highly regarded by his teachers. At the age of sixteen, he started at Edinburgh University, where, forced by his father, he studied law.[116] Bruce did not take to law and soon developed an illness from stress. After time in recovery, Bruce ventured to London and fell in love with the daughter of a rich wine merchant. The two married. Just as Bruce began to enjoy life in London high society, his pregnant wife died of consumption. The loss of Bruce's young wife and his unborn child profoundly affected Bruce. He became deeply restless and hungered for a solitary life.[117]

Bruce set about traveling across Europe and had numerous adventures during this period of his life. He put his astute mind to use, studying along the way. Bruce found that he had a particular aptitude for picking up languages. Bruce's study of Arabic opened up the opportunity to serve as Britain's consul in Algiers, a post that Bruce accepted in 1762.[118] In 1768, Bruce was discharged from his post in Algiers. From there, he went to Cairo and began to dream of discovering the Nile's source.[119] It had been seventy years since the Frenchman Charles Poncet had traveled to Ethiopia, the last European to do so.[120] Travel was impeded because of both the natural barriers to getting there and because Ethiopia had been wracked by political turmoil during that period.[121] Bruce financed his expedition to Ethiopia (his source of income being coal

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[116] Morehead, *The Blue Nile*, 17.
[117] Morehead, *The Blue Nile*, 17.
[118] Morehead, *The Blue Nile*, 17.
[119] Morehead, *The Blue Nile*, 18.
[120] Morehead, *The Blue Nile*, 18.
[121] Bredin, "James Bruce: Charm and Courage in Abyssinia," 122.

from his inherited lands in Scotland). Surely informed by his education, Bruce purchased the best scientific equipment available. He also purchased weapons and horses. Attempting to prepare for his journey, Bruce spent time in Algiers trying to learn Arabic (something Ludolf had advised in his writings). Bruce stated, "Ludolf has assured his readers, that the knowledge of any oriental language would soon enable them to acquire the Ethiopic, and I needed only the same number of books to have made my knowledge of that language go hand-in-hand with my Arabic."[122] After doing his best to acquire the languages necessary for his journey, Bruce set out for Ethiopia. Despite a shipwreck and the death of one of his companions along the way, Bruce eventually made it to the country.[123]

At this time, the Ethiopian kingdom was barely being held together by its young Emperor and the emperor's chief advisor, an old general, Ras Michael. Christian Ethiopia was facing invasion from both Muslims and animists. Although Bruce's primary goal was the reach the sources of the Nile, he needed the blessing of the emperor to travel safely throughout the country. In Bruce's *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*, one sees for the first time a European interact with the political elites of Ethiopia, despite having no real interest in establishing a political or religious relationship. Throughout his writings, Bruce never referred to the emperor as Prester John. Bruce was influenced by the earlier eighteenth century scholars who found belief in and reference to an Ethiopian Prester John antiquated and unintellectual. Bruce, attempting to make a "scientific" discovery, wanted to be seen as an enlightened scholar himself and someone who did not peddle in fantastic old legends like those of the Ethiopian Prester John.

[122] Bruce, Travels, Vol 1 XIII.
[123] Bredin, "James Bruce: Charm and Courage in Abyssinia," 122.

Bruce's account of his first audience with the emperor shows how interested he was with the emperor (something in stark contrast to the earlier venerated descriptions of the emperor by the seventeenth century missionary writers). Bruce stated of his first meeting:

> The king was in an alcove, the rest were out of sight from where the throne was, and sat down. The usual questions now began about Jerusalem and the holy places; where my count was? Which it was impossible to describe, as they knew the situations of no country but their own; Why I came so far?; Whether the moon and stars, but especially the moon, was the same in my country as in theirs?; and a great many such idle and tiresome questions. I had several times offered to take my present from the man who held it, that I might offer it to his Majesty and go away; but the king always made a sign to put it off, till, being tired to death with standing, I leaned against the wall…This, was we afterwards found out, the king very well knew, and resolved to try our patience to the utmost…It was now past ten o'clock, and he showed no inclination to go to bed…By now, when there were nine of ten of us, his menial servants, only present, he uncovered his face and mouth, and spoke himself. I was absolutely in despair, and scarcely able to speak a word, inwardly mourning the hardness of my lot in this first pressment, and sincerely praying it might be my last promotion in this court.[124]

The first audience concluded with an outrageous statement by Bruce. At this point in the long meeting, all of the aides to the emperor began to leave for the night. Bruce said, "[The aides] said, however, they would not go without me; which the king said could not be, for one of the duties of my employment was to be charged with the door of his bed-chamber that night."[125] Bruce commented, "I think I could almost have killed him in that instant."[126]

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[124] Bruce, *Travels*, Vol 3 230-232.
[125] Bruce, *Travels*, Vol 3 232.
[126] Bruce, *Travels*, Vol 3 232.

Although Bruce's primary mission in Ethiopia was not religious in nature, he was in a kingdom where Christianity was central to both political and civilian life and religion often came up when in conversation with the Ethiopians. In a very interesting passage from his book, Bruce relates a conversation he had with the empress of Ethiopia. Bruce said:

> Our first discourse was about Jerusalem, the Holy Sepulcher, Calvary, and the city of David, and the Mountain of Olives, which the situations of which she was perfectly well acquainted. She then asked me to tell her truly if I was not a Frank? 'Madame, said I, 'If I was a Catholic, which you mean by Frank, there could be no greater folly than my concealing this from you in the beginning, after the assurance Ayto Aylo [Bruce's Ethiopian aide] has just now given; and in confirmation of the truth I am now telling, (she had a large Bible lying on the table before her, upond which I laid my hand), I declare to you, by all those truths contained in this book, that my religion is more different from the Catholic religion than yours is: that there has been more bloodshed between the Catholics and us, on account of the differed of religion, that ever was between you and the Catholics in the country.[127]

The conversation then turned to miracles. She pushed back saying that she believed in miracles, like for instance that a picture of a saint would heal the Ethiopian emperor who was suffering from a cold. She said, "There was nothing impossible with God." To this Bruce writes, "I made a bow of assent, wishing heartily the conversation might end there."[128] This account is an extraordinary passage in that Bruce is making comparisons between the Ethiopian Church and Catholicism. There may be more to this passage than just what is said on the surface. Bruce, a Protestant, may be attempting to subtly criticize Catholicism for his Anglo-Protestant readership by making this comparison. Bruce believed that Ethiopian Christianity was corrupted and not a

[127] Bruce, *Travels*, Vol 3 206-208.
[128] Bruce, *Travels*, Vol 3 208.

true form of the Christian faith. By comparing Ethiopian Christianity to Catholicism, Bruce seems to be making a statement more about Catholicism than Ethiopian Christianity.

In his *Travels,* likely in an effort to appear scholarly himself, Bruce spent time analyzing the belief system of the Ethiopians. He generally agreed with the Ludolf when it came to intellectual judgments, perhaps because he felt out of his depth attempting to make scholarly arguments about Ethiopia. Bruce said that "Ludolf [was] the most learned man that has writ upon the subjects" of Ethiopian Christianity."[129] Bruce devoted significant portions of *Travels* to discuss how the Ethiopians came to possess their version of the Old Testament. He questioned the notion of the Queen of Sheba but seemed to agree with Ludolf that the old testament was given by Ethiopia's first bishop, Frumentius, around 330 CE.[130] Bruce also recorded how Ethiopians organized their holy books and the difficulty one had in trying to find the books of the Bible in the country. He wrote:

> The Abyssinians have the whole scriptures entire as we have, and count the same number of books; but they divide them in another manner, at least in private hands, few of them, from extreme poverty, being able to purchase the whole, either of the historical of the prophetical books, of the old Testament. The same may be said of the New, for copies containing the whole of it are very scarce. Indeed, nowhere, unless, in churches, do you see more than the Gospels, or the Acts of the Apostle, in one person's possession, and it must not be an ordinary man that possess even these.[131]

Bruce uses the absence of texts and the veneration of non-canonical figures and stories to make judgments about the nature of Ethiopian Christianity. As a Protestant, Bruce saw Ethiopian Christianity as deeply misguided. He opined, "Many books of the Old Testament are forgotten,

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[129] Bruce, *Travels*, Vol 1 489.
[130] Bruce, *Travels*, Vol 1 489.
[131] Bruce, *Travels*, Vol 1 493.

so that it is the same trouble to procure them, even in Churches, for purpose of copying, as to consult old records long covered with dust and rubbish. The Revelation of St. John is a favorite piece of reading for them…There is no such thing as distinctions between canonical and apocryphal books. Bell and the dragon, and the Acts of the Apostles, are read with equal devotion, and for the most part, I am afraid, with equal edification…St. George and his Dragon, from idle legends only, are objects of veneration, nearly as great as any of the heroes in the Old Testament, or saints in the New."[132] All of this led Bruce to see Ethiopian Christianity as not a true form of the faith. Lacking in the feeling of shared faith probably made Bruce more cynical towards the Ethiopians. Bruce's belief that non-canonical Christian legends were not to be venerated in the same way as canonical stories undoubtedly shaped his opinions of the Prester John myth. It made him less inclined to view the emperor as anyone of great importance to the wider world.

During his time in Ethiopia, Bruce often lived in a moral grey area and many times crossed the line into immorality. He was not above lying to the Ethiopians. He also engaged in questionable behavior with Ethiopian women. He may have fathered a child with Ras Michael's wife, and it known that he had some sort of sexual relationship with at least one local chieftain's daughters. In order to ensure safe passage in dangerous areas, he would often claim that he was related to King George of England and that he was on a special mission. Bruce was able to locate the source of the Blue Nile at Lake Tana and perhaps more remarkably, safely return home to Europe in 1773. His return, however, would not be a welcome one.[133]

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[132] Bruce, *Travels*, Vol 1 493-494.
[133] Bredin, "James Bruce: Charm and Courage in Abyssinia," 124.

Bruce was met with tremendous skepticism by British "armchair" geographers and scholars. Horace Walpole, James Boswell, and even Samuel Johnson all questioned his claims about the Ethiopian region. Johnson was particularly sour towards Bruce because Bruce spoke critically of Jeronimo Lobo, whose *A Voyage to Abyssinia* Johnson had just translated. Johnson said of meeting Bruce that when he met Bruce it was clear that Bruce had travelled to Ethiopia but that it was likely he was greatly exaggerating his account.[134] The ridicule was too much for Bruce. He returned to his country estates in Scotland. Bruce would not publish an account of his travels, still sick from ridicule, until 1789. Unfortunately for Bruce, the work would only stir up more controversy. It would not be until after Bruce's death that many of the claims perceived as fantastical or erroneous by academic contemporaries were validated by nineteenth century explorers and scholars.

British Diplomatic Relations with Ethiopia and the Dismissal of Prester John

By the beginning of the nineteenth-century, the subjects of the British Empire began to look toward Ethiopia in the way that other European powers had eyed Ethiopia in earlier periods. In part fueled by the exploits of early explorers in the region like Bruce, the British government sought to establish diplomatic relations with Ethiopia.[135] As previously noted, Ethiopia at this time was politically fractured. In 1809, the British government planned an expedition to the Emperor's Court at Gondar (although the Emperor's court was now defunct because of the political turmoil in the country). For their mission, the British government commissioned Henry Salt (1780-1827), a well-traveled Egyptologist, to serve as its emissary.[136] Salt would never

[134] Morehead, *The Blue Nile*, 38.
[135] Henry Salt, *A Voyage to Abyssinia and Travels into the Interior of that Country, Executed Under the Orders of the British Government, in the Years 1809 and 1810* (London: Rivington, 1814), 3.
[136] Salt, *A Voyage*, 3.

make it Gondar to realize the court was defunct. Instead, he built relationships with the countries' various warlords. In a Tigrayan warlord named Ras Wolde Selassie, Salt found his closest and most powerful ally for the British Empire.[137] The region ruled by Ras Wolde Selassie, Tegray, had become the most prominent after the Ethiopian Empire had fallen apart. Tegray possessed great quantities of salt, which the British were keen to acquire. Establishing diplomatic relations with warlords like Ras Wolde Selassie became important for the British.[138] Henry Salt was the man who effectively established relations between Ethiopia and Britain in the nineteenth-century.

Similar to James Bruce several decades earlier, Henry Salt had nothing to say about the Prester John legend. When he returned from his diplomatic mission, Salt published an account of his mission entitled, *A Voyage to Abyssinia and Travels into the Interior of that Country, Executed Under the Orders of the British Government, in the Years 1809 and 1810.* In the approximately 600-page long work that touches on the history and culture of Ethiopia, Salt did not mention Prester John. There are several potential explanations for this. The first is that Salt, like Bruce, did not want his work to appear fanciful in any way and felt that mentioning Prester John would diminish his credibility on the subject of Ethiopia. This explanation, however, does not seem logical. Unlike Bruce, Salt delved deeply into the historical relationship between Ethiopia and Europe. He went as far back as the sixteenth-century when the Portuguese were quite literally seeking Prester John. The Prester John legend, while no longer accepted as truth in Salt's day, remained a major element in the historical relationship between Ethiopia and Europe. Neglecting to mention the legend in the historical sections of the book is highly questionable.

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[137] Stuart Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia, The Unknown Land: A Cultural and Historical Guide* (London: L.B. Tauris Publishers, 2002), 63.
[138] Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians: A History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 132-133

Why, then, would Salt choose to omit mentioning the legend? The only reasonable answer is that Salt had a conscious desire to omit the legend from his work. Salt's exact reasoning for this is not understood but his work marks a point at which European writers began to dismiss the notion of an African Prester John even in a historical sense. It is as if these Europeans, on the edge of the age of colonization and imperialism wanted to distance themselves from the Prester John legend because the legend stood in ideological conflict to their reasons for going to Africa.

This notion of dismissing the African Prester John is further reflected in S. Baring-Gould's 1866 work, *Curious Myths of the Middle Ages*, that presents lengthy descriptions of middle myths and legends. The chapter devoted to the Prester John legend begins by saying, "About the middle of the twelfth-century, a rumour circulated through Europe that there reigned in Asia a powerful Christian Emperor, Presbyter Johannes [Prester John]."[139] The chapter then goes on for over twenty pages describing the various writers across centuries who wrote about an Asian Prester John and explored Asia in search for him. In the twenty-four-page chapter, there is only one paragraph at the end of the chapter that makes any mention of an African Prester John. Baring-Gould simply states:

> Bishop Jordanus [1280-1330], in his description of the world, accordingly sets down Abyssinia as the kingdom of Prester John; and such was the popular impression, which was confirmed by the appearance at intervals of ambassadors at European courts from the King of Abyssinia. The discovery of the Cape of Good Hope was due partly a desire manifested in Portugal to open communications with their monarch, and King John II sent two men learned in Oriental languages through Egypt to the court of Abyssinia. The might and dominion of this

[139] S. Baring-Gould, *Curious Myths of the Middle Ages* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1906), 30.

> prince, who had replaced the [Asian] chief in the popular creed as Prester John, was of course greatly exaggerated, and was supposed to extend across Arabia and Asia to the wall of China.[140]

It is remarkable that so little attention was given by Baring-Gould to the vast history of search and belief in an African Prester John. As the nineteenth-century progressed and the imperialist ideology began to take shape, the dismissal of an African Prester John would turn to outright vilification. The motivations for this also become more clear.

Captives & Conflict

The most significant event in the history of nineteenth-century British-Ethiopian relations occurred in the 1860s and came in the form of a conflict that could be called Ethiopia's first true conflict with a modern European imperial power. In many ways, this conflict would color British views of Ethiopians and undoubtedly colored their notions of an African Prester John. The roots of this conflict go back before the 1860s. After Henry Salt established diplomatic relations with various Ethiopian warlords, there existed a strained relationship between the British and Ethiopians. Ethiopian leaders consistently requested military aid from the British to protect themselves from both Egypt and the Ottomans. Britain attempted to play all sides in the conflicts between Ethiopia and its neighbors, but it tended to be more friendly with the more powerful country of Egypt (even signing a treaty with Egypt's leader Muhammed Ali in 1849 that recognized, albeit symbolically, Ali as the "King of Abyssinia."[141]

In the 1850s, the British had initially worked to establish relations with one of the Ethiopian warlords who began to increase in power. This man's name was Kasa, and he soon

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[140] S. Baring-Gould, *Curious Myths of the Middle Ages* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1906), 53-54.

[141] Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 140-141.

subdued all rival factions in the Ethiopian region.[142] In doing so and by claiming Solomonic lineage, although his claim to that lineage was indirect at best, Kasa was able to declare himself emperor of Ethiopia under the new name Tewodros II (sometimes referred to as Theodore).[143] This coronation occurred in 1855 and with it ended the nearly century long period of political unrest known as the Zemana Mesafint.[144] Emperor Tewodros II was instantly disliked by the British government. They believed the ambitious leader would become problematic in their aims for the region as it was believed Tewodros was interested in re-establishing the Ethiopian Empire's former greatness.[145] The British Consul at Massawa Walter Plowden said of Emperor Tewodros II, "[He is] particularly jealous…of his sovereign rights, and of anything that appears to trench on them; he wishes, in a short time, to send embassies to the Great European Powers to treat with them on equal terms. The most difficult trait of his character is this jealousy and the pride that, fed by ignorance, renders it impossible for him yet to believe that so great a monarch as himself exists in the world…".[146] In hindsight, one can see that conflict between the British and the new Ethiopian Emperor would be enviable.

By the 1860s various rebel groups inside Ethiopia began resisting Tewodros II's rule. The Emperor sent letters to several European powers, including Britain, asking for assistance in quashing the rebellion in his kingdom. His requests were met with silence. Infuriated, Tewodros II imprisoned an English missionary named Henry Stern and Stern's assistant.[147] In 1864, a small British diplomatic party led by the British Consul Charles Duncan Cameron was dispatched to

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[142] Stuart Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia, The Unknown Land: A Cultural and Historical Guide* (London: L.B. Tauris Publishers, 2002), 33.
[143] Stuart Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia*, 33
[144] Stuart Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia*, 33
[145] Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 144-145.
[146] Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 145.
[147] Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 153.

negotiate for the release of the British subjects.[148] Upon the delegation's arrival, Tewodros II imprisoned this group as well. Tewodros II then ordered that all royal subjects in his kingdom be imprisoned. The British sent a third negotiator to Ethiopia. This man had some initial success befriending the emperor, but soon the emperor turned on this negotiator too. Queen Victoria, feeling that all diplomatic options to obtain the release of her subjects had been exhausted, ordered a military expedition to Ethiopia to free Tewodros II's captives.[149]

Lieutenant-General Lord Robert Napier was selected to lead the mission to Ethiopia. Napier had earned great acclaim in the British army fighting in India and Pakistan. An ardent supporter of the imperial agenda, Napier's rallying cry against native forces in the sub-continent had been, "Never give way to barbarians."[150] The force the British sent to Ethiopia was immense. At around 30,000 men in strength, the expeditionary force was several times the size of Tewodros II's army.[151] At the first battle in 1868 between the British and Tewodros II forces, the British handily defeated the Ethiopians. Napier sent a letter to Tewodros II promising fair treatment if he accepted defeat and relinquished the British captives. Refusing to quit, Tewodros II retreated to the city of Maqdala. The British soon surrounded and besieged the city. Tewodros II committed suicide and the city was burned. After retrieving the captive British subjects the British force left Ethiopia to sort itself out. The British, allied with the Egyptians and Ottomans, had no intention of occupying Ethiopia. [152]

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[148] Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 155.
[149] Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 156.
[150] Phillip Nicholson, *Who Do We Think We Are?: Race and Nation in the Modern World* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006), section five.
[151] Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 157.
[152] Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 159-161.

Upon his release, Reverend Henry Stern, wrote an account of his ordeal in Ethiopia. Stern dedicated his book in the following way, "To Lieut. -General The Right Honorable Lord Napier Of Magdala, G.C.B., G.C.S.L, whose wisdom, energy, and valor planned, executed, and, with the divine blessing, successfully achieved the object of The Abyssinian Expedition, is, with permission, dedicated, token of profound regard and esteem, by one of the victims of King Theodore's tyranny."[153] More than just the contempt for Tewodros II, this dedication shows the admiration and appreciation for the British imperial forces that invaded Ethiopia. Stern's sentiment of admiration was shared by his countrymen. With Tewodros II's suicide, all future Ethiopian rulers would maintain stable relations with the British, undoubtedly remembering the consequences Tewodros II suffered by provoking the imperial power.

Chapter Three Conclusion

Imperialists in Africa, specifically the British, chose either to ignore the legend of an African Prester John or to demonize it by showing that the legend could be a dangerous source of pride to the conquered peoples in Africa. A likely explanation for why they did this, regardless of whether they did so consciously or unconsciously, was that an African Prester John posed a significant intellectual threat to their justifications for exploration, imperialism, and colonization in Africa. Prester John represented a powerful Christian, civilized, and culturally significant Africa. All of these characteristics were in sharp contrast to the vision of Africans held and broadcasted by imperialists. How the imperialists dealt with the Prester John legend reveals a clear sense of how civilizations like the imperialist powers in Europe dealt with myths and

[153] Reverend Henry A Stern, *The Captive Missionary: Being an Account of the Country and People of Abyssinia. Embracing a Narative of King Theodore's Life, and His Treatment of Political and Religious* Missions (London: Cassel, Petter, and Galpin, 1869), dedication page.

legends that are in contrast with their goals. The legend or myth is simply dismissed or presented in a way that reflects the objectives of the civilization.

Thesis Conclusion

Prester John in the Early Twentieth Century: The Imperialist Narrative

Perhaps the most fascinating commentary on the Prester John legend and what it symbolized to imperialist Europeans came in the form of a 1910 novel titled *Prester John, a book with an imperialistic outlook.* The book was authored by a Scotsman and staunch imperialist, John Buchan, 1st Barron Tweedsmuir (1875-1940). Buchan, in addition to authoring *Prester John,* worked as a soldier, politician, and eventually as the Governor General of Canada. Buchan's book is an adventure story not unlike many that were published in cheap serialized magazines at the time. The story tells the tale of a young Scotsman named David Crawfurd. The character Crawfurd travels in South Africa and becomes embroiled in a plot led by a black South African preacher named Laputa. Laputa is able to lead the uprising by inspiring Africans with the story of Prester John (who in this book is said to have been a real African ruler). Laputa possesses a magical necklet that once belonged to Prester John. With this necklet, Laputa is able to quasi-hypnotize his native followers and claim that he is the rightful heir to Prester John's kingdom. Through a series of dramatic escapades, Crawfurd steals the necklet from Laputa and hides it in a cave. While Laputa is off looking for the necklet that Crawfurd has hidden, the British imperialist forces defeat Laputa's uprising. Crawfurd plays a key role in their defeat. In learning that his uprising has failed, Laputa commits suicide by jumping off a cliff. Crawfurd is

rewarded for his bravery and commitment to the British empire by being given the treasure in the cave that he found. He returns home to Britain rich from his exploits in Africa.

In his novel, Buchan writes several characterizations of the figure of Prester John from the points of view of both the protagonists (the imperial British forces) and the antagonists (the rebellious Africans). When fellow British subjects are describing the uprising to Crawfurd, they explain how Laputa is using the Prester John legend. Crawfurd is unfamiliar with the legend and one of his companions describes Prester John to Crawfurd as "the king of Abyssinia in the fifteenth century…He was a Christian, and the Portuguese sent expedition after expedition to find him, but they never got there. Albuquerque wanted to make an alliance with him and capture the Holy Sepulchre."[154]Another character continues to describe Prester John to Crawfurd, "'There's not very much known about him, except Portuguese legends. He was a sort of Christian, but I expect that his practices were as pagan as his neighbours'. There is no doubt that he was a great conqueror. Under him and his successors the empire of Ethiopia extended far south of Abyssinia away down to the Great Lakes.'"[155] An interesting element to the book is that the British character's remark that the Ethiopian Christianity was not true Christianity. By virtue of Prester John being in Africa, his form of Christianity was not legitimate. This is not unlike the argument used by Jesuit Priests to condemn the Ethiopians in late seventeenth century. By characterizing Prester John as not a true Christian, they are vilifying and delegitimizing him of any claim that Prester John or one of his potential heirs might have had over African territory.

[154] John Buchan, *Prester John* (London: T. Nelson, 1922), 103. Note: Originally published in 1910.
[155] Buchan, *Prester John*, 104.

At one point in the novel, Crawfurd is able to sneak into the rebel native encampment and hear the rebel leader Laputa describe Prester John. This scene allows the author Buchan to showcase the antagonist's perspective on the legendary figure:

> [Laputa] spoke of the great days of Prester John, and a hundred names I had never heard of. He pictured the heroic age of his nation, when everyman was a warrior and hunter, and rich kraals stood in the spots now desecrated by the white man, and cattle wandered on a thousand hills. Then he told tales of white infamy, lands snatched from their rightful possessors, unjust laws which forced the Ethiopian to the bondage of a despised caste, the finger of scorn everywhere, and the mocking word. If it be the part of an orator to rouse the passion of his hearers, Laputa was the greatest on earth. 'What have ye gained from the white man?' he cried. 'A bastard civilization which has sapped your manhood; a false religion which would rivet on you the chains of the slave. Ye, the old masters of the land, are now the servants of the oppressor. And yet the oppressors are few, and the fear of you is in their hearts. They feast in their great cities, but they see the writing on the wall, and their eyes are anxiously turning lest the enemy be at their gates.'[156]

Crawfurd describes the Africans listening to Laputa. He says, "The hearers were in a sort of trance, their eyes fixed glassily on Laputa's face. It was the quiet of tense nerves and imagination at white-heat. I had to struggle with a spell which gripped me equally with the wildest savage."[157] He continues, "By rights, I suppose, my blood should have been boiling at this treason."[158] In writing Laputa's speech, Buchan intended to recast the Prester John legend as something dangerous to the imperialistic order. He has his protagonist almost fall under Laputa's spell, but then he has him quickly, "come to his senses" and declare Laputa's words "treasonous."

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[156] Buchan, *Prester John,* 154.
[157] Buchan, *Prester John,* 155.
[158] Buchan, *Prester John,* 155.

Closing Thoughts

After half a millennium, the Prester John legend began to unravel in the seventeenth century. Like so many other things throughout history, religion and politics were the legend's undoing. Conflicting narratives and new academic scrutiny did not help the legend's survival either. By the nineteenth century, the legend all but ceased to be told, and its association with Africa was almost forgotten entirely. Only when the legend could be used in a way that again served Europeans, in a satirical form as shown with Buchan's novel, did it resurface. This, however, was not the legend in its true sense.

It is not so simple as to say that the Preser John legend faded away because people stopped believing in it. No one in Britain believed the King Arthur legends in the nineteenth century, and yet those stories were told and referenced with great enthusiasm. Legends continue to exist for reasons beyond whether or not they are believed. A legend must be necessary in a society for it to continue to exist. It must fill some gap in the society that nothing else can fill. During the Crusades, the legend of Prester John offered Europeans hope that there might be someone out there who could help them in their cause. To Portuguese emissaries and missionaries, the Prester John legend offered hope of uniting the world through Christianity and also forming alliances against the Turkish Empire. Slowly, however, the need for the Prester John legend began to fade in society. As European countries grew stronger, they were in less need of alliances with Africans (and increasingly poor interactions with Africans made alliances more difficult to establish). As Protestantism became more prevalent, Europeans wanted to abandon the apocryphal medieval tales in favor of only what was scripture.

This work began with the assumption that there was a story behind an ending. In revealing how and why the Prester John legend faded into history this has been shown to be true. While this work has filled a gap in Prester John scholarship, it is also hoped that the work has revealed something about the relationships between groups and how the stories groups tell themselves affect their behavior.

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